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ABSTRACT

A survey was undertaker in Houston, Texas, of participants in a joint ascertainment session. The session had been designed to elicit comment from community leaders for broadcast media which were gathering information as part of their license renewal process. Those community leaders and representatives of the broadcast facilities who had participated in the joint ascertainment survey were mailed questionnaires about their participation. It was found that the community leaders believed that there was value to the process, that their participation would have an impact on program decisions, that the broadcasters were interested in what they had to say, and that they were willing to participate in the future. There was a general opinion that more questions of a specific nature should have been asked. The broadcasters felt that the process was valuable, believed that the community leaders were interested in participating, endorsed the concept of joint ascertainment, and indicated their willingness to participate again. (TJ)

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ASCERTAINING COMMUNITY LEADERS: AN ALTERNATIVE METHOD

The Federal Communications Commission has developed the concept of community ascertainment since 1960 from a vague requirement to a specific license renewal mandate. At first a formal process for ascertaining the needs of the service area was not considered necessary. The determination of the community's needs could be accomplished, according to the former line of thought of the Commission, by "longtime local residence and familiarity with community affairs".[1]

The FCC's, Public Notice of August 22, 1968, "Ascertainment of Community Needs by Broadcast Applicants" set forth methodologies and suggested ways to ascertain community leaders. If the process was conducted in "good faith" it was theorized that the resulting program decisions would be rooted in the needs of the service area. In 1971, "The Primer on Ascertainment of Problems by Broadcast Applicants" with a supplemental "Report and Order" set forth very specific requirements on how ascertainment should be done.

There are two basic steps in the ascertainment process: ascertainment of the general public and ascertainment of community leaders. Most of the "how to do it advice" either from the Commission or other groups such as the National Association of Broadcasters is concerned with the requirement to contact the general public and this type of general ascertainment research is not substantially different from other forms of survey and opinion research.[2]

Difficulties arise in developing a plan for the ascertainment of community leaders. The Federal Communications Commission provides

a "Community Leaders Checklist" listing twenty categories of "leadership" from which input should be sought, depending on the composition of the service area. The FCC further "suggests" the number of completed interviews to be gathered in each market size. The Commission requires that 50% of the interviews be done by "management" category personnel, those people who at least in theory are making the programming decisions.

Despite these guidelines the issue still exists as to whether formal ascertainment procedures, especially of community leaders, is desirable.[3] Controversey swirls around the concept of "joint ascertainment" of community leaders, especially in the large media markets. From the broadcasters point of view, joint ascertainment has many advantages: it is a more efficient use of man hours, especially of management personnel, second, it saves time and energy, hopefully, with no less of effectiveness.

Similar benefits accrue to the community leaders. Many are quite open about their disinterest in being beseiged by numerous representatives of broadcast facilities who essentially ask the same questions. For community leaders in large markets, joint ascertainment is a more efficient use of their time and in some cases is the only format under which they will participate.

Opponents of joint ascertainment include the Office of Communications if the United Church of Christ and the National Black Media Coalition. They feel that the "town meeting" is no substitute for face-to-face interviews. Their contention is that the community leaders will have more impact and a more attentive audience if ascertainment is a form of one on one communication.

However, NBMC is not always consistent. They have previously stated that "we know we are asking for more 'talking' which is what ascertainment

is and not for more program performance which is what we really want. Because we have been shown so much disrespect by all media we do not care what methods are used to get this performance".[4]

The Federal Communications Commission allows broadcasters to participate in joint ascertainment ventures;[5] but the tone of some FCC statements indicates a lack of true enthusiasm for this type of endeavor.

All broadcast licenses in the Houston, Texas Media Market (6 television, 30 radio, both commercial and non-commercial) were required to file for license renewal on April 1, 1977. Given the large size of the market, the number of outlets and the past problems in gaining co-operation from some categories of community leaders, Houston Area Broadcasters proposed and received permission from the Federal Communications Commission to conduct joint ascertainment to obtain some of their quota of interviews. Community leaders were invited to a forum where with the assembled representatives of the broadcast licensees.

The community leaders were asked to comment on the problems and needs of the Houston Area, after which there was a question-and-answer session. The ground rules were that questions should be framed so as to encourage input and commentary on the part of the leaders, not to engage them in a debate on the role of the electronic media in Houston. The purpose of this research was to evaluate the face-to-face process from the perspectives of the broadcasters and the community leaders and to begin to address the problems raised by Krasnow and Quale"...whether formal ascertainment procedures are philosophically desirable or practically effective".[6]

METHODOLOGY

The University of Houston Campus Radio Station, KUHF-FM, participated in the Houston Area Broadcasters Joint Ascertainment Survey. The list of community leaders invited and interviewed by all the broadcasters was obtained from the local public access file.

Each participant was sent a ten-item questionnaire asking them to assess their experience. The questionnaires were mailed in less than two weeks after the completion of the interviews. The format was a combined open end, yes/no and multiple choice. One hundred and fifteen mailings were made with stamped, self-addressed return envelopes. The total response was 87. A cover letter explaining the nature of the project was included. It was explained that this research was neither commissioned by Houston Area Broadcasters nor was it part of any ascertainment process, joint of individual. The anonymous nature of the replies was guaranteed.

A questionnaire with similar items regarding the communication process, but with changes appropriate to represent the other side of the table was sent to each of the broadcast facilities who participated in the questioning process. Response for the "Broadcasters Assessment" totalled 22. All data was tabulated and correlational analysis was performed.

RESULTS-COMMUNITY LEADERS

The community leaders were asked to identify themselves only by checking the leadership category they belonged to as defined by the Federal Communications Commission Checklist. Unfortunately the information gained under this category was not usable. Although each community leader was invited as a respresentative of some specific organization or group, most of them perceived themselves in a multifaceted

role and indicated several areas of leadership activity.

When asked why they participated in community ascertainment 55% indicated that they were specifically asked, 18% volunteered to represent their particular organization, 9% were assigned; 64% had participated before, either in Houston or in some other community, 93% would be willing to participate again; 73% indicated that the broadcasters were "interested in what I had to say; 87% felt that there was value to the process and 73% said that their participation would have an impact on program decisions.

A total of 87% approved of having ascertainment done on a joint as opposed to individual basis. There was, however, a general feeling that more specific questions should be asked.

RESULTS - BROADCASTERS

60% of the respondents represented a television station or a radio-television combination; 86% were specifically asked to participate; 82% had done it before and all were willing to do it again; 91% stated that the community leaders "were interested in participating"; 59% felt that the process was valuable, while 41% said that "it may be of some value"; 82% endorsed the concept of joint ascertainment, however, only 64% felt that a formal ascertainment process was necessary.

PEARSON CORRELATIONS

Community leaders who had participated in previous ascertainment procedures were the most likely to feel that their participation would have some impact on program decisions, this willingness to participate also correlated with the belief that the broadcasters were interested in listening. The belief that the broadcasters were interested, the feeling that the process was valuable and would have an impact on program decisions

were all highly intercorrelated.

From the broadcasters perspective, being from a television or radio-television facility correlated with the feeling that the process was worthwhile and with an interest in doing it again.

OVERALL RESPONSE TABULATIONS

	Broadcasters	Community Leaders
Previously participated	82%	64%
Based on this experience, would participate again	100%	92%
Felt that the other party was interested in being there.	91%	73%
Felt that the process was valuable.	59%	87%
Felt that "joint" proceedure was correct.	82%	87%
Felt that formal ascertainment was unnecessary, (licensees only).	36%	

N for Broadcasters = 22

N for Community Leaders = 87

DISCUSSION

Despite some latent reservations on the part of the Federal Communications Commission and some more obvious reservations on the part of such groups as the United Church of Christ and the National Black Media Coalition, joint ascertainment of community leaders is apparently a viable method for accomplishing part of the ascertainment requirement in the large media markets.

Initial observations must include comment on the "Community Leaders Checklist" provided by the FCC. Although the Commission would like to pigeonhole community leaders into neat categories, the officials themselves, refuse to be so limited. Each community leaders was specifically invited to represent one particular interest classification, on the questionnaire, they were asked to "identify" themselves by checking one leadership category. This they declined to do with such consistency, that no comparasions, tabulations or analyses, could be made on the basis of leadership category. Although the Commission speaks often about how it will not "substitute" its judgment for the judgment of the local licensee, it has a priori, determined that a unified, nationwide system of classifying civic and community leaders can be the basis for ascertainment. This decision, at least as it applies to the Houston Market, if faulty.[7]

As the results indicate, both the broadcasters and the community leaders, most of whom had experience in ascertainment before, approved of the method: bringing together the assembled representatives of the broadcast outlets with the local leaders.

Additionally, there was an overwhelming willingness to participate again. Of course, a good deal of this favorable attitude can no doubt

be accounted for by the economy of time and effort involved. It is very time consuming and inefficient in a market of some 36 licensees to have each of them arranging interviews with essentially the same people.

From the point of view of the community leaders, this is again a more efficient method of participating in the license renewal process. Many people, especially in the political and governmental arenas, find it annoying to be beseiged by representatives of each station who ask the same questions. Broadcasters often find it difficult to gain community participation due to this time-consuming and repetitive nature of the ascertainment process. The value of the joint procedure is clearly underscored by the willingness of the community leaders to participate in the future.

It would be both inaccurate and unfair to declared the joint ascertainment process a success simply because it was a conveint way to "get it over with". Significantly, both the community leaders and the broadcasters had the feeling that the "other side" wanted to be there and were listening to what was being said. Also the community leaders felt that their participation would have impact on programming decisions. This in in theory, the crux of ascertainment: the soliciting of opinions to utilize in program judgments. The Federal Communications Commission stress "localness" to such an extent, that data, such as is in evidence here, should clearly outweigh any reservations held by "national" groups, such as UCC and NBMC.

The community leaders of the Houston Market are indicating that joint ascertainment is fulfilling a number of their needs, including the reason for the existence of the ascertainment process in the first place: the determination of the problems of the viewing area. Critics of the

process must also bear in mind, that while the broadcast licensses are obligated to conduct ascertainment of those designated by the FCC as "leaders", the latter groups are under no obligation to participate and have indicated a great reluctance to be part of individual ascertainment proceedings.

The overall theme of the broadcasters' responses was consistent with that of the community leaders. They approved of the format and felt that the process was worthwhile. The correlations indicate that those respondents who represented a multiple outlet were strongest in their approval of joint ascertainment.

Again, it must be emphasized that the fact that joint ascertainment is a more efficient use of time and man power does not alone account for approval of the process by the participants. There are consistent correlations between variables that gave the respondents the opportunity to express their feelings as to the value of participation, the impact that it would have on programs and the belief that both sides of the table conveyed to each other the feeling that the group wanted to be there. If localness means anything, it must follow that the needs of this market and the fulfillment of the ascertainment mandate are being met by allowing broadcasters to conduct their community leader survey on a collective basis.

Despite the fact that there is talk about and acknowledgment of the need to correctly identify "community leaders" and categorize them,[8] the current process as guided by the FCC Checklist is inadequate. Finally, the major criticism of the process by the local officials was that the questions did not allow them to be specific enough in identifying problem

areas and offering suggestions as to the "needs" of the market. This finding supports the recent research of Heller when she determined that a better method of specifying problems was needed. But first, the correct people must be identified and contacted. Taking these results in light of the concept of localness and the findings of other researchers, the following conclusions can be drawn:

1. Joint ascertainment is an efficient management technique in the large media markets.
2. Joint ascertainment allows both the community leaders and the broadcasters to interact in a manner that they feel is mutually beneficial.
3. Participation in and a favorable attitute towards community ascertainment will be encouraged through the combined efforts of licensees in implementing the data gained from ascertainment.
4. The Federal Communications Commission and the National Association of Broadcasters should encourage the concept of joint ascertainment and seek to refine the process.
5. Refinements should include: (a) correctly identifying community leaders, (b) making the questions more specific and (c) studying joint ascertainment meetings from an interpersonal communications perspective.

NOTES

1. Beamon Advertising Inc., 1 FCC 2d 28, 32
2. Ascertainment of Community Needs: Suggestions For The Survey of The General Public., National Association of Broadcasters, Research Department, Washington, D.C., May 1976
3. Erwin G. Krasnow and John C. Quale, "Ascertainment: The Quest for The Holy Grail", Public Telecommunications Review, Volume 2, Number 3, June, 1974, p.6.
4. NBMC Comments in Docket 19816, pp. 1-2.
5. Joseph M. Foley, "Ascertaining Ascertainment", Journal of Broadcasting, Fall, 1972, pp. 387-406
6. Krasnow and Quale, p. 6
7. Mary Ann Heller, "Problems in Ascertainment Research". Journal of Broadcasting, Fall, 1977 p. 427
8. Ibid, p. 431